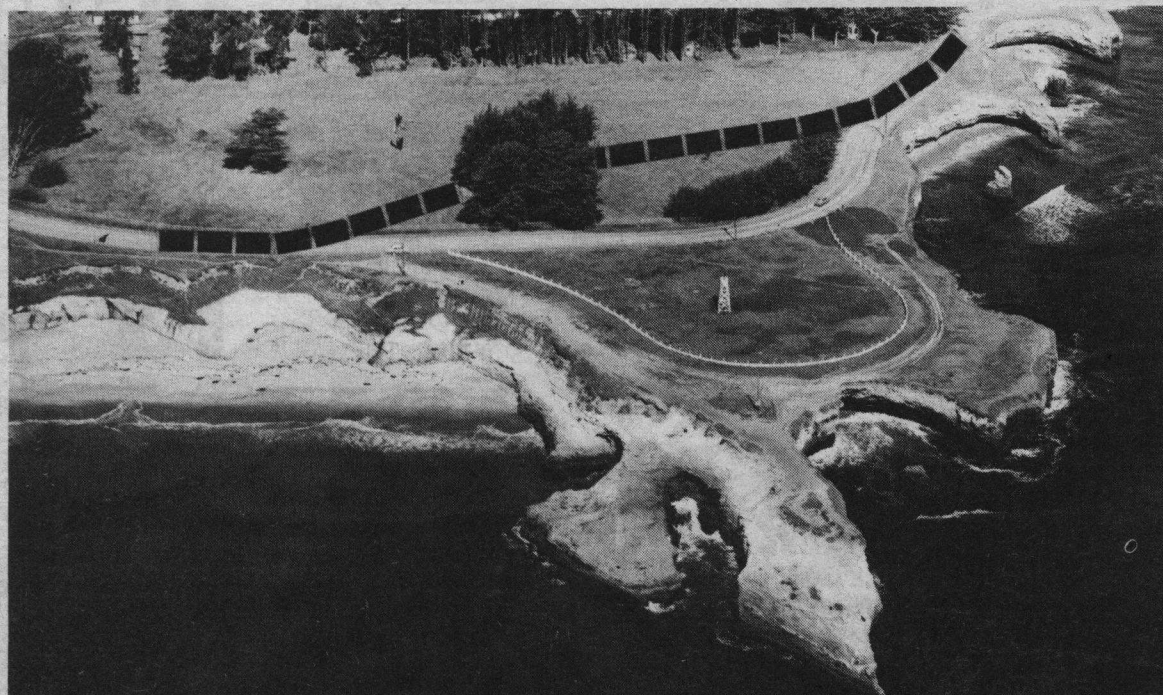


COVER STORY

Lighthouse Field: The Final Round? ^{'82}

After 20 years of controversy, the fate of Lighthouse Field may be coming to a head



A view of the point before the lighthouse was built. The dotted line indicates where the road will be relocated

SHELLEY BUCK

WHEN they were teenagers, he and his wife would spend the better part of Saturday nights necking on this spot. Set barely 100 feet from the sea cliffs, the location offers one of the best views of the ocean, bay and Boardwalk, attracting lovers of all ages as well as surfers and sightseers to West Cliff Drive.

In a new chapter of an old West-side story, a proposal to lop 1000 feet off the current West Cliff Drive and rebuild part of the road 200 feet further back from the sea has revived the battle over Lighthouse Field.

The state claims the move is necessary to allow room for a proposed park, and to push back the threat of the sea cliff's erosion. Opponents of the plan insist the position of West Cliff Drive offers a unique view and prime access to a public spot.

The roots of the controversy lie deep in the recent history of Santa Cruz politics. The owner of Lighthouse Field in the '60s obtained approval from a pro-growth city council to build a convention center on the 35-acre parcel adjoining Lighthouse Point, but was unable to obtain financing for his venture.

The field changed hands several times, but the idea of a convention center lingered. In the early '70s, new owners, a group called Teachers Management Investment Corporation (TMI), lined up financing for a second civic center plan.

That proposal called for a seven-story Hilton hotel, a shopping center, housing and a convention center on the oceanside site — the latter to be developed jointly by the city and county. By December of 1972, backers of the convention center thought they had everything sewn up to go ahead, but they had not reckoned with community resistance to the development of the city's last major chunk of open space near the

ocean.

Concerned residents and environmentalists began a grassroots campaign against the project. The years 1972 and '73 were favorable times for their effort, when the 4,796 students then at UCSC gained the right to vote. (The Supreme Court granted 18-year-olds the right to vote in 1972.) Student votes swelled the progressive activist constituency which would capture a council majority within a decade.

In 1973, environmentalist candidates, who had never before been represented on the city council, won three seats in Santa Cruz. All had based their campaigns in part on the preservation of Lighthouse Field.

But the council voted to approve the new convention center over the objections of the environmentalist minority. In the wake of the vote, Lighthouse Field supporters launched a city-wide initiative and placed on the ballot a measure forbidding the city to take part in developing the convention center. The initiative

passed overwhelmingly in 1974.

A short time later, the newly-formed California Coastal Commission rejected the convention center project. About 1000 citizens jammed the Coastal Commission hearing to watch the final axe fall, recalls Andy Schiffrin, aide to progressive Supervisor Gary Patton.

According to Schiffrin, Lighthouse Field became a symbol in the squaring-off between Santa Cruz's pro-business establishment and a newer, community-based style of politics. "It was a galvanizing issue for the liberal-progressive-environmentalist community," said Schiffrin.

Patton, back in the early '70s, served as legal counsel to the Lighthouse Point Association, which advocated preserving the field. In 1974, Patton entered the race for County Supervisor and won the seat he continues to hold. Like Patton, Councilman Mike Rotkin and many of today's progressives cut their political teeth on the Lighthouse Field issue.

In the wake of the convention center's defeat, the county and city appointed the Lighthouse Field Advisory Committee. That committee, which still meets, is made up of representatives of the board and council, and representatives from the city and county's planning and parks departments, as well as independent appointed citizens. The Lighthouse Field Committee, according to Schiffrin, "represents a fairly broad spectrum" of people. If they have a bias, he adds, "it's a bias to preserve Lighthouse Field."

As its first major move, the committee hired William Mott as a consultant. Mott, who had served as state parks director under the Reagan governorship, was to help persuade the state to make the field into a state park.

That, recalls Schiffrin, "was a very touchy negotiation," which dragged on and on. The State Parks Commis-

sion had to approve of the idea. Then the state legislature had to be coaxed into putting up the money. The state was unwilling to condemn the property in order to obtain it. And the owners were reluctant to sell unless their price was met.

What price? The state finally completed its purchase of Lighthouse Field in 1980 for almost \$6 million. In a complex deal worked out among the many bureaucracies involved, the field was to become a state park, but the city and county jointly would plan the park and afterwards maintain it.

Following the land acquisition, the Lighthouse Field Committee sought public input on what the park should be like. A questionnaire went out to 800 city and county residents, and an informational mailing was sent to 28,000 area households. These were followed by a string of public workshops in 1981 and '82, and a public hearing.

Some citizens wanted a park full of activity areas; others sought the solitude of nature. Some wanted to keep West Cliff Drive where it was. Others opted to close it off and divert traffic along Pelton Street. Finally, a proposal emerged that would shift West Cliff Drive inland 200 feet. In the place the drive had occupied would stand a picnic area for "intensive" park users. Park visitors who preferred nature in the wild could head for the other side of the new West Cliff Drive, where 32 acres of open space were to be preserved for them.

Severe erosion plagues the cliffs surrounding the lighthouse, and this factor figured in the decision to move the road back from the cliff. Dick McKinney, an engineer with the city's Public Works Department, says riprapping is scheduled to begin at the northern side of the lighthouse this week or next, weather permitting.

But the city has no project in the works for fixing up the southern side.

McKinney thinks that riprapping, if done properly, will hold for at least ten years, unless a storm "greater than people can imagine" hits the point.

Not everyone concurs with that view. An environmental review of the area prepared by the San Francisco firm of Torrey and Torrey, Inc., notes that the bedrock underlying the site is part of the Purisima Formation, a mix of siltstone, mudstone and sandstone. Longterm average erosion rates for this kind of rock formation, the report notes, are about 12 inches per year.

Of even greater concern was the report's finding that, "the collapse of ten feet or more of the bluff at one time commonly occurs." Although some riprap had been placed at the foot of the bluff in the most severely eroded areas by the city and the Army Corps of Engineers, the report concluded that continuing erosion at the site, even if slowed by anti-erosion measures, "is inevitable."

The completed scheme for the park "wasn't everybody's first choice," according to Mardi Wormhoudt, city council liaison to the

Lighthouse Field Committee; but the committee thought it was workable. The city council gave its approval to the proposal on February 22, 1983.

But at the 11th hour last month, the city council found itself with a petition bearing some 700 signatures of people protesting the shifting of West Cliff Drive. On October 25th, with an election approaching, the council, acting on a motion by then-Mayor Bruce Van Allen, punted the problem back to the Lighthouse Field Committee.

Bob Bell, who chairs the Lighthouse Field Committee, said he doesn't believe the late-hour objections stemmed from a great majority of Santa Cruzans. "I really believe that it started out as just a very few people who had some extreme views and [were] not open to compromise," he said.

Wes Reed, a 50-year resident of the Branciforte area on the other side of town, is spearheading the criticism. Reed says he was unable to attend the committee's workshops because all were scheduled during working hours, but he has fought the plan since last June's public hearing.

Reed has pieced together an unlikely coalition which includes the local chapter of the International Typographical Union; the Long Board Union, a surfers' group; an ad hoc West Cliff Drive Preservation Committee and the conservative Organized United Taxpayers.

Their aim is to keep things exactly the way they are. All are concerned that moving the street means handing a strip of city taxpayers' property over to state control. Reed also contends that shifting the road would deprive drivers and the handicapped of a splendid view. To save the scenic route, he would like to see riprap placed at bad spots along the entire length of West Cliff Drive.

Some surfers worry that the state might block the road, establish admission fees, and limit access to surfing at Steamer's Lane. Steamer's is one of the most renowned surfing spots in California.

In fact, many of those who now oppose the moving of West Cliff Drive are still smarting with indignation over the way in which Natural Bridges State Park was established. The state, according to Reed, took

over the area, put up a gate, and started charging admission. Said Reed: "You get kind of fired up when you see somebody coming in and telling you to get off of a street that you paid for."

Bell says the Lighthouse Field Committee has taken the access question seriously. Under the park plan, Bell said, the city intends to trade land with the state, so that the proposed inland route of West Cliff Drive will remain firmly under city control.

In the new state park, surfers' access to Steamer's Lane would be enhanced by a rebuilt staircase down to the water's edge. The committee doesn't think moving the road a scant 200 feet will have much effect on the view.

To clear up misinformation about the effects of moving the road, the Lighthouse Field Committee decided at a meeting held Nov. 14 to set up markers showing exactly where the cutoff would go. Critics and supporters of the committee, along with the public, are invited to walk the proposed road for themselves along with committee members on Saturday at

noon. Following that walk-through, the committee will hold a public forum to hammer out, once and for all, a plan for Santa Cruz County's newest state park. The meeting will begin 1 pm at the Marelllo High School library.

Even after that meeting, however, the committee's labors could be far from over. The city council must hold another hearing on the matter, and, at a public hearing scheduled for mid-January, the state must decide if the park plans conform to state requirements. Otherwise, it's back to the drawing boards.

"Hopefully, people will realize that it's not that big of a deal," said Schiffrin. But, he added, "When it comes to Lighthouse Field, nothing is easy."

As the fight over the land's fate drags on, November's first heavy storm has created a new lagoon on the field in question, the coastal cliffs, lashed once more by winter rains, are quietly eroding in the direction of Lighthouse Field, and one washout has crept to within six inches of the disputed pavement on West Cliff Drive. •